DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 700 JC 800 392

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TITLE Feminism Vis a Vis Social Change.
PUB DATE 12 Jul 79
NOTE 18p.: Paper presented at Dartmouth College (Hanover, NH, July 12, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills: Change Strategies: *Community Colleges: Continuing Education: Females: *Feminism: Nontraditional Students: *Outcomes of Education: Peer Counseling: Program Descriptions: Program Development: Research Needs: *Social Change: Student Educational Objectives: Student Teacher Relationship: Two Year Colleges: *Womens Education: *Womens Studies

ABSTRACT

While demonstrating the potential of feminist education to promote positive social change, experiences with the women's studies programs at Staten Island Community College (SICC) and Brooklyn College (BC) also dramatize the need for women's studies to overcome factionalism and middle-class elitism in order to construct a pedagogy for oppressed women. The SICC program, initiated in 1972, allowed women on the verge of autonomy to share life experiences in informal groups and to help one another pursue aspirations beyond traditional women's role. Yet after several successful efforts and just as the program was to become formalized through the establishment of a women's study center, differences between academic, Marxist, and lesbian feminists rendered the program directionless and ineffective. Even more complicated were the difficulties encountered at BC, where conflicts between women's studies faculty and women's center staff were compounded by problems of student motivation. BC students, less affluent than SICC women, existed in a state of dependency created by welfare and marriage, and were unwilling to engage in critical dialog or take responsibility for their education. Therefore, the program at BC emphasized a core curriculum of basic skills with a network of peer support. Knowledge about the role of minority and working class women is needed to advance the BC program from this continuing education role. (JP)

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FEMINISM VIS A VIS SOCIAL CHANGE

By Dr. Sandra Adickes
Presented at Dartmouth College
July 12, 1979

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As I thought about what I would say to you, I was concerned with putting the theme on which I had been asked to speak into a context that would connect with the themes and problems you were examining here. I knew that Paoulo Freire's work was the background text for your workshops and sessions. I read Pedagogy of the Oppressed and then decided an appropriate presentation to you, at the close of the first decade of women's studies, would be a decription of my involvement with women's studies programs in two different settings, using as a model the essays in Radical Teacher which describe specific effforts to promote social change through education, with analyses of strengths and weaknesses in clear, straightforward language.

I should say, first of all, that I came to feminism and women's studies by what may now be regarded as the classic route: after participation in the civil rights and anti-war movements. I chose academia as the context for acting out of my new state of consciousness, as other women veterans of the Sixties chose law, medicine, or politics. In 1972, I was appointed an Assistant Professor of English at Staten Island Community College, an institution that had begun as many community colleges had: to provide training in technologies to returning World War II veterans. With the advent of Open Admissions, this conservative blue collar college was being transformed into a vital center of liberal education "recognized throughout the country," according to the president, "as being at the cutting edge of innovation." Open Admissions students were not to be shunted off into separate remedial programs, as was the case at other City University units; the funding for programs was turned over to the departments, and within the English Department, there was genuine and uniform commitment to providing compensatory education of quality to students whose earlier preparation had been inadequate. New faculty were

hired, not because they were remedial specialists, but, in the words of a colleague, "because their life experiences, civil rights work, or unusual academic histories indicated a commitment to the disadvantaged." Of this period at City University, my colleague wrote, "I and many of my colleagues have been revitalized to the point of reexamining what we think teaching is all about." In this atmosphere of ferment, many curricular changes were taking place, and when I came to SICC, I found a number of women faculty who were in the process of joining with women students to build a women's studies program.

In a study commissioned in 1976 by the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs, Florence Howe described the three phases of women's studies programs. The first phase was characterized by the coming together of individual faculty members -- usually women in the Humanities areas -- who offered courses "on" women in their departments. Usually these courses achieved a structural breakdown of the traditional teacher-student hierarchy in the classroom, with teachers and students sitting together in a circle on the model of the consciousness-raising group. The women students in these courses joined the teachers in an effort to expand their areas of concern; together women faculty and women students sponsor projects on individual campuses, obtaining funding, for example, from an often reluctant student government or college administration to hold a weekend conference or to invite women in various fields to come to the campus as guest speakers. Gradually, these voluntary efforts of students and faculty forged the individual courses into a program. The establishment of a program marks the second stage of Women's Studies, characterized by a paid administrator, the assignment of a portion of the college or university budget, and an approved curriculum that

is published in the official academic catalogue. In the third phase of development, Women's Studies programs have a tenured staff, adequate administrative support, and a permanent curriculum.

In 1972, the Women's Studies program at S.I.C.C. was well into the first phase. The student population served by the college is predominantly Italian- and Irish-American. Women students from these groups entered college under Open Admissions in greater numbers than formerly, and in the Women's Studies classes -- sociology, psychology, history, or literature courses presented from a feminist perspective -- they discovered in the texts and classroom dialog options for themselves their teachers, friends, and families had never offered them. Their teachers and peers in the Women's Studies courses provided them with the support necessary to pursue aspirations and confront family opposition to any but traditional women's roles.

I was particularly pleased by the numbers of older women who enrolled in my Women's Literature course, diffident and unsure of themselves at first, but quickly recognizing and drawing upon the strengths they had acquired in their life experience. A typical student would be a woman of forty who had taken a commercial course in high school -- often a parochial high school -- had earned good grades, had even thought about going to college, but had gone to work instead because her father had become ill or died. She had married after two or three years, often a civil service worker, or policeman or fireman, and had had children, usually three or more. She had been active in school parents' associations, in church, or community groups. The increasing independence of her children had prepared her for the stated aims of the women's movement, and she entered college as a means of reclaiming early aspirations or pursuing newly awakened ones.

The presence of such women in the classroom resulted in an exchange across generations. In one of the popular texts I used in the course, Marge Piercy's Small Changes, a young woman from a working class family gets married in a dreadful wedding provided by her family instead of the college education she really wanted. A discussion of this segment of the novel led to a social history of weddings. A woman married in the forties described her ceremony as a "football wedding" because every one who wanted to come came and guests were thrown sandwiches like footballs. A woman married in the fifties described the formality of that era, as well as the blatant materialism of weddings of the era, in which formal invitations were sent, and each guest was informally made to understand how much cash the gift was to be. A young woman who had been married in the late sixties described her wedding on a boat off the Florida Keys; she and her husband had composed their own vows, and the guests caught lobsters for the wedding feast. The dialog across the generations included challenges: again, on weddings, one woman spoke out impatiently: "You just have to get rid of the idea that when you march down the aisle on your father's arm, you're going off to a bed of roses. Marriage is simply not what you think it is, or what I thought it was going to be. It does not solve your problems, it gives you new ones." Strong peer support also developed in these cases, and enabled women to deal with difficulties they encountered within and without the institution. A woman who was a classic example of the returning student: she was forty, the wife of a policeman and mother of six children, including a deaf son in need of weekly clinical treatment, reported to the class she had discovered in herself a talent and liking for science. She regularly got A's in her physics tests, and this achievement upset her teacher, who kept telling her, "After a certain age, you can't learn this information. If you want to be a scientist, you

have to start young." The class helped her realize his resistance to having himself proved wrong should remain his problem, and should not inhibit her enjoyment of science. The reward for the faculty in the Women's Studies courses was the knowledge we were helping women transform their lives, that they would and did go on to pursue and achieve goals, and their experiences in Women's Studies courses made those achievements possible. We also had the reward of the camaraderie of our students, and the knowledge we were defining teaching in a new way. Of her own experience at another branch of City University during the late fifties, a colleague wrote, "My life as an undergraduate was often tedious, a boring spongelike existence in which I was forced to attend pointless lectures by professors reading from notes that had yellowed at the edges and which I had then to copy down and repeat back at the end of the term. I still possess my notebook from my own freshman composition class. The major part of the semester consisted of the professor reading to us from his notes on grammatical definitions. He would pause between each sentence to insure that we had copied down the definition of a noun or a verb accurately. I find it hard to believe and yet the definitions are still there, neatly imprinted in my English 1.1 notebook. Fortunately, my students are less tolerant than I was, are more involved in confrontation. This is a different world from the thirties, the forties, and the fifties, and the measures are different."

However, establishing those different measures was often a weakness in our courses. These were Women's Studies courses, and we expected a product at the conclusion as evidence of the intellectual interaction among students, teachers, and texts. We did not want to impose on our students the traditional measurement of progress -- a term paper or an examination -- but we did not engage with them in dialog about defining together an appropriate product and the steps necessary to achieve it. Our students were confused about what they

should produce, but did not want to risk losing our good opinion of them by confiding their confusion to us, and so the discussion was avoided until the end of the term when they should submit an uncrafted personal statement or an obviously plagiarized term paper. I believe we avoided engaging with our students in critical dialog about this process because the task was difficult; it seemed to place us in a traditional role we wished to avoid, and threatened the relationship with our students. There was also, I think, a tendency to reify the students by romanticizing them. And so we did not engage in decoding the skills we had mastered, and which, for lack of mastery, others might fault them. I remember a discussion among colleagues one night about whether we should correct the usage of a bright student in the Women's Studies courses who habitually said "youse" as in "What are youse doing tonight?". "No," said one woman; "Mary's language is all right as it is. She makes sense when she talks; people can listen to what she's saying, not how she's saying it." "We should tell her," another woman insisted, "because people will penalize her for her mistakes, and she should be told what is accepted and what is not so she can make choices. Besides, you're being dishonest. You wouldn't hire her as a teacher, would you?"

Throughout this first phase, women faculty had been working together in a loose association with a generally good feeling toward each other. We decided to formalize our relationship, organizing ourselves into a coalition in order to move on to the second phase of the development of Women's Studies. We wanted funding for a women's center and an administrator so that projects and programs emanating from Women's Studies would be accessible to a wider community of women. In a review of Florence Howe's study in Radical Teacher in December, 1977, Nancy Hoffman observed that "typically each program endures

pain at coming of age, the moment when a paid administrator or coordinator is hired. During the debate over who is to be hired and 'how' all internal political tensions emerge." When the women's center was funded by the college administration, differences among the women at SICC surfaced and sharpened. Gay women wanted programs that served their needs; academic feminists became concerned with the quality content of programs and appropriate credentials in the person to be hired. Marxist feminists rejected programmatic recommendations of academic feminists as elitist. There was a protracted struggle, and eventually one of the contending ideologies prevailed. But the center became sectarian in the eyes of the students, and most women avoided it. Its funding was later withdrawn.

The women's coalition did not disband over the issue of the women's center, but we had faltered at a significant stage of our development. Our vitality diminished as differences remained unreconciled. I do not know whether it was possible, given our disparate personal histories and points of view, to avoid fragmentation. I do not believe that it would have been possible, even if we had achieved cohesiveness, to withstand to any significant degree the drastic curtailments resulting from the fiscal crisis of 1975-76. However, I do regret that we did not document our successess -- trumpet the achievements of students who had been in our program, for example -- and communicated our discoveries about teaching to the wider college community so that some aspects of our experience could have been incorporated into the college in its new existence after it was merged with a senior college in the borough in 1976. The dynamic president, who had vowed that he would have to be carried out of the college during its period of crisis -- in order to quiet rumors that he was thinking of leaving -- was offered the presidency of the

merged institution, but decided to accept the offer of a presidency he had applied for at another institution. His successor, was dedicated to turning the merged college into a Harvard on the Hudson, and energetically dulled the cutting edge of innovations made in his predecessor's administration. Only the students, fewer in number than formerly, and dropping out more rapidly, remained the same.

In 1977, I became the coordinator of a funded program for women at Brooklyn College. The program, designed for women who wished to continue their education, had also been experiencing internal difficulties, centering on tensions between project workers, who were employees of the grant, and the institutional principals on the grant, representatives of the women's studies program and the women's center at the college. These women had been involved in the design of the program, but their primary affiliations were with the other two women's programs, and they were not involved in the day-to-day functioning of the project as the project staff were. A predecessor in my position had resigned, and the remaining workers on the project were in a state of depression. There had been serious and extensive efforts to achieve collective decision making; and long meetings devoted to role-definition and elaborate governance plans that prevented the workers from performing the tasks of the program. But the contradictions between the roles of the project staff -- the workers -- and the institutional principals -- the bosses -- could not easily be resolved. Not that the women's center staff nor the women's studies faculty were truly oppressors, but their own constrained relationship to the institution in an era of diminishing resources could not, at times, keep them from placing the interests of their primary program affiliations before the interests of the project. The first task, in my view, confronting the project was to restore morale to the staff by ensuring that the people

who were actually performing the work of the project had a more decisive role in determining how the project should function. The second important task was to ensure the project's usefulness by bringing it more fully into communication with the women it was designed to serve. And the third important task was to ensure the future of the project beyond the period of federal funding by negotiating with college administration for its institutional base. The second task is the one, I believe, principally related to the theme of social change, and the one on which I shall focus.

As the program, whose special mandate was to serve low-income women from an ethnically diverse community surrounding the college, was originally designed, there were three principal components. Sections of a free, non-credit re-entry course were to be offered to women at community sites and at Brooklyn College. The course, team-taught by two facilitators, was designed to provide basic skills competency and a place where women could examine their options -- and make decisions about whether to remain in their communities, or to return to school or the workplace. The second program component was to be a sequence of innovative, inter-disciplinary college courses offered at the college and in the community, dealing with community issues such as health care and local school governance. The third component was a program of peer counseling to provide support for women who were in the process of making changes in their lives.

Early in the actual functioning of the program, changes had to be made. The women who came into the program demanded more basic skills instruction in the re-entry course, and resisted effforts to bring them to a critical analysis of their life situation. They rejected the "innovative, interdisciplinary" courses dealing with community issues which they saw as too much a part of

the experience in which they were submerged, and demanded what was for them a non-traditional experience -- traditional college courses in English composition and psychology. A third change was made in response to their need for more skillful counselors than were available to them in a peer counseling program, and the project counselor recruited graduate interns in counseling to work with the program.

Other problems in the program were more difficult to solve. At Staten Island Community College, the women who enrolled as students brought with them a wide range of experience on which they had reflected; they entered classes on a level of consciousness almost level with that of their teachers; they were prepared to enter into critical dialog and to assume responsibility for their education. The women who came to the program at Brooklyn College were more typically, but not uniformly, submerged within their experience as single heads of households on public assistance or as wives and mothers who functioned primarily within their homes. Women in the re-entry course recognized "banked" education as the only legitimate form of education; they expected their teachers, the experts, to give them large deposits of information each week that would, like medicine, make them smart. They felt they were cheated if they did not get this packaged information, and it was very difficult to bring them to a point of assuming responsibility for their education, or to engage in dialog about its place in the context of their lives. Unlike the Brazilian peasants described by Freire, the women avoided discussion of felt need -- they did not wish to expose themselves before neighbors, nor did they perceive personal need as a legitimate part of education. They would not, however, usually express these feelings openly; passivity is the social heritage of women and they would leave the class. We only made these determinations after extensive follow-up studies on attrition, which was high. We had originally designed

the course to be an instrument of exploration of options, but we discovered that women with a clearly defined goal were more likely to remain in the course than women who were tentative, and so we focussed the course on the goal of returning to school. However, it took us more time than it should have for us to realize that dialog with individual learners must begin before they enter the course, and that this dialog with a learner must include a mutual assessment of her needs and goals and our program's capacity to assist her in meeting those needs and goals. We also came to recognize the need to communicate to each learner our assessment that life planning was an appropriate curriculum area in the re-entry course, and that women could not make changes in their lives if they did not first determine both the steps involved in making changes, and their own ability to take those steps. We also determined, sadly, that since women are not often rewarded for the uses they make of their time, they do not value it. They value things that cost money, however, and so we have concluded that the re-entry course should be transformed into an adult education offering for which a fee, however small, is charged, extending a policy we implemented earlier when we discovered that women were more likely to attend workshop sessions or meetings of an assertiveness training course if they were asked to make a deposit of money that would be returned to them upon completion of the course.

A further problem resulted from the casualness with which women had been encouraged to enter the college through our program. A policy of "demystifying the institution" had not been accompanied by a procedure that would inform a woman of what was involved in going to college (especially if she would need financial aid and would be required to take a full program in order to qualify for it) and to involve her in an assessment of her basic skills entitlement and life situation to determine whether she could, in fact, undertake a program

of academic study. We found, especially among deprived women, college responded to their fantasies, college attendance gave them self-esteem, but they were not sufficiently in control of their lives in order to determine an educational goal and to follow it through to completion. Attrition was high therefore, and so in the second year of the program, we established an interview and assessment procedure.

We have had to acknowledge to ourselves and to women who come to us that we cannot meet every one's need. I concede that I had never encountered such a broad and complex range of need in women as I did when I joined the program at Brooklyn College, and my experience in women's programs goes back almost ten years and includes work with women in Title I districts in New York. This complexity of need is not simply a function of poverty, but does arise from the condition of dependency, which I have witnessed -- in broad terms -- in two areas of social manipulation: welfare and marriage. I have been stunned by the impact of the imposition of tuition at City University and the concommitant inception of financial aid. Without stopping to ponder the implications of the end of the tradition of free tuition at City University which continued for 137 years through numbers of bad economic cycles, including the Depression, until hard times in New York coincided with the emergence of a distinctly different clientelle, or to speculate on the probable total cost of administering financial aid programs in New York State, or to reflect on the relationship between financial aid and the curtailment of programs at CUNY and the expansion of programs at private colleges, I can report that the effect of the financial aid program has been to transform educational entitlement into a form of welfare manipulation, involving the learner in a degrading process of deceit and "getting over." Women on public assistance who come to college in order to increase their welfare package through financial aid will only involve themselves

in a further hassling process with the Department of Social Services, and will never become autonomous learners. They come to our program to extend their dependency; they resist our efforts to assist them to take charge of their lives. Their history has conditioned them to think themselves incapable of acting for themselves, of deciding on a course of action and following through on it; they interpret our refusal to invade their consciousness as rejection and they become angry with us. The need of these women is beyond the resources of our program. For these women there must be an intervening community agency, where people they can recognize as peers can assist them in building a supportive structure in their lives. From the beginning of the program, we have been in communication with the community agencies to which learners in our program respond. A model for the kind of intervening agency I have identified is the Sisterhood Of Black Single Mothers' Sister to Sister program. Under the leadership of Daphne Busby, the program brings young single mothers into a supportive relationship with older single mothers who have survived the system and have achieved control of their lives. The older women assist the younger women through the stress of parenting alone, they encourage them to complete their high school education -- a condition of acceptance into the program -- and help them plan a program leading toward an end of dependency on welfare. However, women's dependency on men is far more complicated than dependency on welfare. If a woman's husband opposes her educational plans, his refusal to cooperate with housekeeping or child-minding chores, his complaints about the decline of quality in their home will usually erode a woman's determination to go to college. Certainly the opposition of husbands is one of the principal causes of attrition in our program, but even where a husband's opposition is not a factor, a woman's dependency on her husband will prevent her from nego-

tiating her way through a situation that is difficult or one about which she is ambivalent. Women's dependency on men can cause them to undermine themselves in other subtle ways. For example, a bright woman with two children entered our program at about the same time she had established a new relationship. Her teachers recognized her talent and encouraged her; when she realized that she might achieve academic success, she realized at the same time that academic distinction would put her ahead of her lover and threaten the relationship, that was, at best, tenuous. She became pregnant and stopped attending her courses.

We have learned that we can best serve women who are on the verge of autonomy, and who can use our program as a link between aspiration and achievement. An evaluator has described our program as providing a loving, supportive atmosphere for a learning situation. Out of the chaotic early beginnings, we have constructed a good educational program at the college, building on our student's need for basic skills entitlement, we have established a core curriculum of remedial math, English Composition, and a Social Science course. The classes are scheduled in sequence, and the structure enables the women to build a network of peer support and to construct a cohort that will continue when they enter the mainstream of the college and pursue individual regimens. In the project, we do all that we legally can to discourage men from entering the courses, for from my own experience and the testimony of other women involved with womens' programs, men profoundly invade women's consciousness; in the presence of men, women keep silent. We negotiate with departments for faculty and have attracted some outstanding teachers to our courses, who report their own enthusiasm for their experience with our students back to colleagues. We have not always made good choices, however, notably in the cases of two teachers deeply committed to a feminist ideology -- one a Marxist-

feminist and the other a lesbian-feminist. In each instance, students reported back to us (after the course was over, when we could not intervene), that they found the teachers arrogant and contemptuous of them, impatient with them, and unwilling to respect their students' points of view. Women who teach in women's programs must be extremely skillful in dealing with their own and their students' ambivalent feelings about women. Women students are generally more critical of women teachers; they expect more from them in the way of support -- even sympathy. The challenges posed by women teachers in women's programs must be presented in ways that support the ego while enabling students to go forward and enter into dialog. Women studies teachers who have encased themselves in ideology and do permit dialog are doing so, I believe, not so much from what Freire calls nostalgia for the past, but from fear of it. They recognize in their students former stages of their own consciousness which they have come to reject.

The correspondence I receive from postsecondary institutions around the country indicates to me that programs such as the one I am presently involved in will be increasing. Our program, and others already in or coming into existence are designated "Continuing Education" programs. Because these programs usually involve a basic skills entitlement component, they are not seen as glamourous programs. They are, in fact the step-sisters of women's studies. As of 1976, according to Florence Howe's study, there were 270 programs, and 15,000 different courses developed by 8500 teachers at 1500 institutions. That is healthy. Another sign of health is the National Women's Studies Association, which held its first national convention this past month. But these programs and courses and the association address the concerns of primarily white, middle class women. And I believe the greater need is on the part of women who are the learners or prospective learners in programs like

ours at Kings County College. Among the specific recommendations Florence Howe made in the conclusion of her report, was that knowledge about and the role of minority and working class women in women's studies must be strengthened. I have not seen evidence that this is happening since there is pressure on feminist scholars to produce "respectable" research. Indeed, feminist scholarship is thriving, and therefore there is less incentive for feminist scholars to address the educational needs of this constituency of learners. But when, I encounter in significant numbers women who have had 8 or 10 or 12 years of schooling and have emerged with third grade reading scores and an inability to complete their thoughts in writing, I know that their minds have been invaded, and that if women's studies is to be more than a narrow discipline, if it is a movement genuinely committed to educational equity for women, it must seriously concern itself with constructing a pedagogy for oppressed women.

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